

NEW BOOKS.

A Russian Estimate of Tolstoy and Dostoevski.

It will be generally admitted that no living Russian is better qualified than is DIMITRI MERKOWSKI, the author of "The Death of the Gods," to discuss the two greatest Russian novelists since Turgenyev, and for that reason we are indebted to the translator of the book entitled "Tolstoy as Man and Artist," which includes an essay on Dostoevski (Putnam's). The author begins with pointing out that, in the case of both Tolstoy and Dostoevski, their works are so bound up with their lives, with the personality of each writer, that, before studying them as artists or thinkers, it is indispensable to learn what manner of men they were. The two novelists started on very different social planes. Tolstoy was the descendant on his mother's side of the Grand Duke St. Michael of Chernigov, and on his father's of Peter Andreievich Tolstoy, the favorite of Peter the Great, the Chief of the Secret Chancery and a tutor to the Czarovich Alexei. Dostoevski, on the other hand, was the son of a staff-surgeon and a tradesman's daughter, born in a charity hospital at Moscow. His first impressions were of poverty and his whole life was spent in poverty until just before the end. Tolstoy early achieved literary distinction, and has always since been famous. Dostoevski's first novel, "Poor Folk," was successful, but his next story, "The Double," was a failure, and thereafter, although he was to produce such a masterpiece as "Crime and Punishment," his literary career was a desperate struggle with Russian public opinion. The attitude of the two writers toward literature was fundamentally different. From his youth up, Tolstoy never having known anything but poverty, wanted to work for a living, he struggled his shoulders scornfully at the notion that the true artists can work for money. One can recognize the prejudices of the old-fashioned country squire in the contempt for men who depend upon the pen for a livelihood. As men possessed of the old pride of gentle birth, though it degrading to earn their bread by manual labor, so Tolstoy deems it derogatory to take pay for intellectual work. Dostoevski, on the other hand, was never ashamed to toil for money like a plain journeyman. He used to speak of himself as a "post-hack." On one occasion he wrote against time three and a half printed newspaper pages in two days and two nights. "I have never sold," he wrote, "any of my books without getting the price down beforehand. I am a literary proletarian, and, if anybody wants my work he must insure me by prepayment."

Comparing the two novelists from the aesthetic point of view, our author assigns much the higher place to Dostoevski, on the score of catholicity of comprehension and taste. Dostoevski, himself, used to say that he had two countries, Russia and Europe; in the book before us he is pronounced as, next to Pushkin, "the most Russian of Russian authors, and, at the same time, the greatest of our cosmopolitans. Tolstoy, on the other hand, although himself an artist of European celebrity, and himself deeply characteristic of Russian nature, is not credited with the capacity for fully absorbing universal culture which distinguished his rival. In spite of all his calculated and supposedly Christian cosmopolitanism, there is not, in Merkwowski's opinion, another great Russian writer so hampered as is Tolstoy in his creative power by conditions of place and time and the limits of his own nationality. We know, for instance, that in his youth he was in Italy, but he brought thence no impressions; we should never know from his writings that he had ever crossed the Alps. It is not denied that the creator of "Peace and War" had, when he wrote that work, an intellectual appreciation of history, but it is contended that he never penetrated, or thought it worth while to penetrate, by means of the imagination, into the spiritual life of other ages and other nations. His only interests are contemporary national activities—those of the Russian working class and those of the Russian gentlemen. From his youth Tolstoy's aesthetic sympathies seem to have been narrow. Merkwowski denounces the "childish blasphemies" which Tolstoy heaps upon fables undispensed and ancient. To Tolstoy, for example, "Faust" is counterfeited coin because it is too artistic and artificial. The love tales of Boccaccio he regards from an ascetically Christian standpoint as "a mass of sexual nastiness." The creations of Eschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Dante, Milton and Shakespeare, the music of Wagner and of Beethoven's later period, Tolstoy first calls "calculated and unimportant," and, later, "coarse, vulgar and often senseless." During a performance of "Hamlet," he experienced, he tells us, "that particular malaise which meretricious works produce." Merkwowski is disposed to compare the parader of such heresies to some savage Caliban shattering Etna marbles, or to Herostratus, the Ephesian, who burnt the temple of Diana merely to gain notoriety. On the other hand, the same Tolstoy, who raises his hand against Eschylus and Dante, and to whom Pushkin is, if not "a school-book in a yellow cover," yet a dissipated man who wrote improper love verses, bows down in simplicity before Berthold Auerbach, George Eliot, and "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Merkwowski is convinced that in his conscious judgments on branches of art that are strange to him, Tolstoy at the closing of his days has not gone far from his first youth. When he studied with enthusiasm Dumas, Eugene Sue and Paul de Kock. "More deplorable still, from under the dread mask of Caliban peeps out the familiar and by no means awe-inspiring physiognomy of the Russian democratic squire, the gentleman-postivist of the sixties."

Dostoevski's mind, on the other hand, was hospitable to all the ancient and modern literatures of Europe. Not only did he appreciate Shakespeare, Schiller and all the great representatives of Romanticism, but he could also value highly the great French classics of the seventeenth century, Corneille and Racine, whom, in his boyhood, it was fashionable to regard with disdain. This son of a pauper-hospital surgeon, while acknowledging the inward artificiality and imitativeness of the French classics, revelled in the completeness and rounded harmony of form exemplified in the court poets of Louis XIV.

From the moral point of view the two writers cannot be compared. Merkwowski holds that Tolstoy, although he himself in his "Confessions" denounces some of his own acts because they were not animated by Christian intentions, has really nothing to hide: "There is nothing for him to be ashamed of—all is pure, all innocent, as the nakedness of a child." Nobody would pretend that so much can be said for Dostoevski. Although biographies may try to palliate or explain away the disclosures in his "Notes From Underground," it is manifest that the dark side of his life was not edifying. The profound difference in their personal experiences seems to be reflected in the faces of Tolstoy, who is here described as the lord of the present, and of Dostoevski, who is commended to the future for the full measure of his fame. "Tolstoy's traits," says Merkwowski, "are those of a man who has lived long and grandly, peacefully and happily. The face of Tolstoy, in spite of the wrinkles of seventy, is full of unfading youth, freshness and somewhat haughty frigidity." Beside it our author places the face of Dostoevski, "never young, even in youth, shadowed by suffering, and the cheeks sunken. The huge, bare brow, bespeaking the clearness and majesty of reason; the piteous lips, twisted as if by the spasm of the 'sacred sickness'; the gaze dim and inexpressively heavy, as if turned inward; the slight cast in the eyes, as of one possessed. What is most painful in this face is a sort of immobility in the midst of movement, an endeavor arrested and turned to stone at the height of effort."

M. W. H.

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Continued on Tenth Page.

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